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Agate

A Few Words on Adulteration.

The public will remember the preceeding Parliament granted the appointment of a Select Committee, to enquire into the Adulteration of Food, Drinks, and Drugs. This Committee, moved for and presided over by Mr. Scholefield, sat during two Sessions; on it were gentlemen connected with trade, whilst many of its members are distinguished by their acumen, and were numbered amongst the most eminent members of that Parliament—lords and gentlemen accustomed to examine, probe, and weigh evidence—every witness examined, willing or unwilling, testified before this Committee more or less to the prevalence of adulteration; many pointed out the injury done to the public health by it, and also the danger necessarily arising from the adulteration of drugs.

The facts thus elicited were published in nearly all the newspapers, and circulated throughout the empire, exciting universal attention; and after duly weighing the evidence, the Committee arrived at the conclusion, that adulteration widely and extensively prevailed in food and drinks, attributing much of the prevalent intoxication to the contamination of drinks with narcotics and other noxious agents, and deciding that it was desirable means should be resorted to to put a stop to the practice. Much of the information brought out during this investigation was of a scientific character—related to the objects of adulteration, the employment and uses of agents in the practice of it—and is calculated, unless some stringent steps of repression are shortly taken, by opening the floodgates of knowledge to fraud, materially to increase the evil. Again, taking as an example the common adulteration of bread with alum, the dishonest trader is enlightened, not only as to the effects of this substance in enhancing to him the value of inferior and unwholesome flour, but also as to the quantity which would lead to his detection, by deranging the stomachs of his confiding customers and ruining his credit.

Moreover, occasionally the uninitiated receive instruction by the publication of receipts for adulteration like the following, the diffusion of which far and wide by the press will, unquestionably, as long as it can be used with impunity, tend more to increase the adulteration of port wine than anything that has occurred for years :—

“ Good cider 45 gallons, brandy 6 gallons, good port 8 gallons, ripe sloes 2 gallons, stew them in 2 gallons of water, press off the liquor, and add, if the colour is not strong enough, tincture of red sanders ; in a few days this wine may be bottled. Add to each bottle a teaspoonful of catechu, mixing it, when it will soon produce a fine crusted appearance. The bottles being packed on their side, as usual, soak the ends of the corks in a strong decoction of Brazil wood with alum, which, along with the crust, will give it the appearance of age.”

Many witnesses spoke of the great injury inflicted on trade by adulteration, indeed it requires little thought to see that such a system as this is subversive of all honest, fair, open, and upright dealing, substituting for competition in quality, a competition in ingenuity to simulate and defraud.

It has been authoritatively proved by this long and searching enquiry, that nothing except raw materials—fish, flesh, and vegetables—I previously stated, escapes contamination and sophistication when in the hands of a nefarious dealer ; who, utterly regardless of everything except his fraudulent gains and his own safety in obtaining them, scruples not to introduce the most potent poisons into articles of food whenever it suits his interest and his purpose to do so.

But it was thought and said by many excellent persons, that public attention being roused and a Parliamentary Committee sitting, the practice of adulteration would diminish, and the fraudulent cease in a great measure from perpetrating their tricks, cheats, and crimes on the community. Groundless and vain opinion ! fraud is calculating, selfish, and is not deterred unless punishment sharply tracks its steps and overtakes it. How stand the facts ? On the 8th of August, 1855, the first Session of the Committee’s labours terminated, and in December of the same year what happened ? Look, ye who sing “ confound their knavish tricks,” and mean foreigners ; read.

ye who are engaged in regenerating society in England, the following quotation from the evidence of a member of the Committee, Mr. Wise, given the 9th of April, 1856:—

“Mr. Wise stated, in reply to the Chairman, that he had received a communication from one of the British authorities in Spain, informing him that the Spanish Government, in consequence of the immense quantity of adulterated drugs and other articles which came from this country into the ports of Spain, had found it necessary to look into the question, and last December, the Cortes passed a law creating a Council of Health, subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior, with regard to the question of the adulteration of food, and especially with regard to the adulteration and contamination of drugs. Mr. Wise laid before the Committee a condensed view of the Spanish law, and also said that Inspectors had been appointed at all the ports to examine and, if need be, destroy drugs.

“Mr. Gregson, a member of the Committee, enquired how long those regulations had been in operation? Mr. Wise replied, since last December. Mr. Swift asked whether that was owing to the quantity of adulterated drugs sent from this country? Mr. Wise—Yes.”—*Third Report*, p. 325.

But while shipments of shamefully adulterated commodities were made to Spain during the enquiry, it may be asked, what has been going on in our own country since the termination of the investigation in May, 1856? The relation of a few cases will afford a glimpse.

In consequence of the reception of a report from one of the parish surgeons, Mr. Richards, complaining of the pernicious effects of the tea supplied to the paupers in May last, I received a communication from the Birmingham Board of Guardians, requesting that I would examine a sample of the tea and report thereon. I did so, and found the black very deficient in strength, whilst the greater part of the green was so thickly coated with poisonous mineral matter, that it remained unburnt in hard nodules long after the rest of the tea was consumed. The Board of Guardians, who have evinced a laudable determination to protect the poor from these abominable adulterations, at once ordered the use of green tea to be discontinued.

During an enquiry in the Coroner's Court, Birmingham, it came out in evidence, that certain adulterated articles of confectionary,

reported to have caused the death of a child, were composed of twenty parts of sugar, ten of terra alba, with a little gum dragon and Glenfield starch, and the witness, himself a manufacturer of confectionary, stated that this terra alba was generally used in the trade.

In Carlisle, soon after the Birmingham investigation, we find the Mayor calling the attention of the Health Committee to a white powder which he had received from a baker, to whom it had been offered by a commercial traveller at a shilling a stone, for the purpose of adulterating flour. It appeared the traveller had visited several shops, leaving samples at each, informing the millers and bakers that the substance would not only add weight to the flour, but also enable them to sell an inferior article at a much higher price by imparting whiteness to flour of a dark colour. The white powder was analysed by one of the medical officers of the infirmary, and found to be terra alba or sulphate of lime.

Would this be permitted in any other country? Assuredly not. But we are a commercial nation, and as John Smith only does to John Brown what John Brown would do to John Smith, why say nothing, do nothing; but what virtuous indignation would both these worthies express in a case of active felonious poisoning? Yet both may be engaged in mixing up the same substance, or one leading ultimately to the same result, and obtaining what they call a *profit* thereon. As this, however, is done in the way of business, let it alone, don't interfere until a few atoms of flesh, called human beings, are unmistakably killed by it.

Again, another case, adjudicated on by Mr. Travis, the Stipendiary Magistrate at Hull, is remarkable in the history of adulteration in this country, and goes far to prove that silex or flint is used to adulterate flour. Mr. Sollitt, the analytical chemist engaged in the case, found the bread made from flour, sold by a dealer in that town, adulterated with five per cent. of siliceous matter. The seller, however, notwithstanding his plea of ignorance, was fined £10 and costs.

It may be ascertained at any time that a valuable medicine for children is now generally sold with forty, fifty, sixty, and even seventy per cent. of adulteration in it, tending directly to counteract its effects. and with the genuine drug in existence, how under these circumstances can a dose be apportioned?

By this baneful system, not only are mild remedies rendered nearly inert, but are occasionally converted into poisons; recently, a small dose of a mild mercurial was prescribed as an alterative for an infant, which had quite a contrary effect to the one intended—producing violent vomiting and purging, with great prostration—and this resulting from adulteration; whilst in another instance, a case of emergency—a gentleman struck down by apoplexy, a large dose of a very active medicine—croton oil, the best that could be procured in the neighbourhood—was administered, without relieving the patient; but when one-third of the genuine article was given, it operated within an hour. Need it be remarked what a fearful loss of time occurred, and how the chances of life were diminished during the interval! It requires no great effort to see that the criminal practice of adulterating drugs is fraught not only with danger to the sick, but also imperils the position of the physician, by rendering his calculation of results uncertain; and it cannot be denied, after the public disclosure we have had lately, to do nothing to suppress it is to permit, nay, more, it is to sanction a CONTRABAND TRAFFIC IN DEATH!

If adulteration could be checked by exposure, then, beyond all doubt, the adulteration of bread with alum would have ceased long since. Recent cases prove the reverse, and show the pernicious system of mixing a powerful astringent with an article of first necessity has become almost universal. Nay, further, the very agitation of the question, requisite to create a public feeling, has been productive of mischief.

Indeed, in one district, Holborn, it has been deemed necessary by the Board of Works to circulate generally amongst the inhabitants the report of the Medical Officers of Health, pointing out the disorders originating from the use of alumed bread, and cautioning the

people against it. Whilst at Scarbro' an entire family was made seriously ill in consequence of an adulteration with this substance practised in a neighbouring country town, and from a flaw in the Bread Act, rendering its provisions almost inoperative, in small towns and villages no redress could be obtained.

At Liverpool, within the present month, it appears from the report of a meeting of the Health Committee, that kegs of butter have been sold to the poor containing only 48 per cent. of butter—the remainder being composed as follows : salt, 24 per cent., mucilage (supposed to be from Irish moss), with water and traces of fat, 28 per cent.—the mucilage no doubt enabling the fat and butter to retain more water.—The Law Clerk considered an indictment under the Health Act would not lie, as nothing in this nefarious compound could be established as prejudicial to health; he therefore recommended the purchasers to proceed against the vendor for fraud.

But there is no need to enumerate further instances of adulteration: it may perhaps become incumbent on the honourable member for Wolverhampton (Mr. Villiers), and on those who aided to establish free trade, to see that its doctrines are not prostituted. Free trade implies integrity and confidence in transactions, otherwise there can be no freedom; it means, that no class shall fictitiously and unnaturally enhance the value of a commodity and pocket the surplus; what connection can there be between these principles and adulteration? Say what they may, an adulterator is a sly thief, a deceiver, and a swindler. It matters little what position wealth may give him.—He may reside in Chicory Villa or Catechu Hall, in ill-gotten Penny Square: nevertheless, he is a swindler, perhaps a poisoner, and his proceedings have nothing whatever to do with free or fettered trade, unless a monopoly in fraud is to be granted.

With reference to the remedy for this enormous social evil, it has been said of the poor, "God help them," of the rich, "They may protect themselves." But how the latter can be accomplished is to me a mystery, unless the cook is furnished with a good microscope, turned into a chemist, and the kitchen into a laboratory. Oh, but

it may be said, educate the poor, teach them the nature and properties of "common things," diffuse information generally amongst them; then they will be able to protect themselves, not only from the adulteration of food, but also from the adulteration of everything else. In reply it may be said, the poor, even were they educated, have neither the time nor the means whereby those frauds can be detected and exposed; quite enough have they to do to earn bread, much less analyse it; besides, the character, perhaps the position and prosperity of a tradesman is involved in the investigation. Care, therefore, is to be taken by bringing a proper amount of practical and scientific information to bear, that he does not suffer by random and unfounded charges. The busy and anxious merchant, the professional man with his cares and his responsibilities, the upper and middle classes of society, cannot afford to dive into all the minutiae of every ingenious trick invented by the prolific brain of fraud, to swindle them in their food; nor is it necessary they should, when a small and insignificant sum would in a great measure put a stop to the present adulteration, and secure them from the perpetration of such enormities in future.

Individual action cannot grapple with adulteration; the principle of protecting communities by local bodies is not a new one, and it may be justly asked, why should the fish-stall be inspected? the butcher's shop be looked to? the publican heavily fined for mixing grains of paradise with his malt? whilst other traders tamper as they please with their commodities; adulteration is therefore to be suppressed in the same way any other gigantic nuisance is removed, by a public officer, a summary process, and punishment of the offenders.

If the advice given, not long since, to a retail druggist by a commercial traveller is not be followed, all honest traders will cheerfully accord their support and help to destroy a baneful system of competition. The druggist alluded to, complained to the traveller of the firm which supplied both him and his neighbour with the same article, that the latter undersold him, and enquired whether the house supplied him below the price marked in the list, and charged

to him : to which the traveller replied by saying, "You must set your head to work, study, and see how you can adulterate the article to undersell him."

A trader sets up a shop, he sells for profit, and is bound, seeing that he fixes the price he asks for his commodities, to supply the public with the article enquired for ; common prudence therefore suggests to him the speedy removal of a source of danger.

A country jealous of its commercial position and honour after such an exposure as we have had, would have demanded at once a prompt and an efficient measure, short, sharp, and decided in its action, the repression of a crime, and the obliteration of a huge blot and stigma on the national character.

More than three years have now elapsed since this question was brought before the public, and except the important Parliamentary inquiry nothing has been done. Nay, the very inquiry itself, with its attendant and necessary publicity, will aggravate the mischief already produced by the publication of reports elsewhere.

But what has been the effect of the agitation in England on other countries? France has amended her laws, and made them more stringent. Belgium has promulgated an efficient measure, while in Spain, as we have seen, an enactment passed the Cortes, appointing inspectors at the ports to prevent the importation of adulterated drugs from England, and in Australia a committee has been appointed to inquire into the subject ; so in all probability we shall hear shortly of steps being taken to prevent the importation of adulterated commodities from the mother country. Whilst here, at home, in England, with its moral schemes, its reformatories, and its plans for progressive improvement, a system which saps and undermines all still goes on unhedged and unchecked, almost with impunity. With the facts proved and the case fully made out, unless it is to be said and concluded that we are so engaged in the acquisition of wealth, as to be utterly regardless of all principle in business transactions, legislation must soon follow, and remove this great scandal and disgrace from the country.